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# The Critical Nexus: Deindustrialization, Racism and Urban Crisis in Post-1967 Detroit



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## Introduction

The Detroit vice squad entered the “blind pig”<sup>1</sup> during the early morning hours of July 23rd, 1967. What began as an almost routine raid initiated a five-day riot that would leave 43 dead, 467 injured, 7,200 arrested, and over 2,000 buildings scorched.<sup>2</sup> The Detroit case was not the first violent outcry by African Americans during the Civil Rights Era. The turbulent 1960s were marred by many such riots from New York to Chicago to the Watts section of Los Angeles. These riots struck city centers with great veracity, but the fact that similar incidents occurred in so many dissimilar cities begs the questions of what these cities have in common, and were these incidents less like riots and more like rebellions against the inequality that persisted in urban centers well beyond the apparent successes during the civil rights movement?<sup>3</sup> Tensions were high across the country as racism persisted and inequalities remained salient. Blacks in many major cities were without work and equal access to adequate housing. Opportunities were limited for blacks as quality education and stable employment were difficult to secure. Many thought Detroit was different than other urban centers; Detroiters Ron Scott explained the misconceptions about Detroit’s immunity to a riot:

A lot of people felt it couldn’t happen in Detroit because people had good jobs, they had homes, and generally it was a good time, it was carefree, and people didn’t have anything to worry about. But you can’t always judge things by how they appear on the surface. Inside most black people there was a time

bomb.<sup>4</sup>

The time bomb Ron Scott was referring to was indicative of a widespread frustration that was even better illustrated by the rebellions springing up across the country. These riots were a symptom of some very deep racism and classism. Though significant strides were made during the Civil Rights era, many of the changes did not tangibly impact the everyday lives of blacks,<sup>5</sup> and during the 1960s and 1970s the nation saw a more militant and proactive activist orientation. It is in this context that universal black frustration had the potential to translate into violence and rebellion. On the surface it seemed as though Detroiters were working and moving into the middle class, but in reality joblessness was increasing with each year as industry began to decentralize and automate.<sup>6</sup> The world economy was changing and so were cultural attitudes. The riots that occurred in Detroit at the end of July 1967 were not senseless or causeless as some would suggest: “There were some civil rights overtones, but primarily this is a case of lawlessness and hoodlumism. Disobedience to the law cannot and will not be tolerated.”<sup>7</sup> The racial antagonisms and sentiments of unrest grew from a long tradition of systematic discrimination that impacted many aspects of everyday life. It is true that conditions do not exist in a vacuum, and as Williams Julius Wilson described in his 1990 book examining joblessness in Chicago, *When Work Disappears*, “racial antagonisms or the expression of racial tensions are the result of social, political and economic influences.”

Prior to July 23rd, 1967, Detroit had a history that shaped its environment into

1 An illegal after-hours night club.

2 For more description of the 1967 riots see *The Algiers Motel Incident*.

3 These questions are not the focus of the following pages but important to mention nonetheless.

4 Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 375.

5 Though the civil rights movement did much for the ideal of equality, structural changes had not occurred on a wide enough scale to translate into real equality.

6 Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 21.

7 Michigan governor George Romney as quoted in the August 4th, 1967 TIME article about the riots. For further description by TIME see the issue. Governor Romney’s insistence that the riots were mostly “hoodlumism” echoes the sentiment of many members of the State during this time.

one where a seemingly miniscule and mundane conflict could most certainly escalate into a full-scale riot. In brief these environmental factors included racism, inequality and hopelessness. As the smoke cleared from the empty streets it became apparent that the city was changed forever, and with each year that passes it remains obvious Detroit has never truly been able to recover from the impact of this explosion.

The following pages seek to explore specific aspects of Detroit's history that created a city with a deep chasm between the rich and the poor (oftentimes white and black) and how that chasm became a motivator for the 1967 Detroit riots which scarred the city and have impacted the persistence of urban crisis to this day. Thomas J. Sugrue writes:

Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, inter-related, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of inequality. . . Detroit's racial and economic crisis emerged in a particular context—mid-twentieth-century America.<sup>8</sup>

The context that Sugrue is referring to will be further explored in the following pages, but what is most important to remember is Detroit's history prior to the postwar urban crises, including the impact of the Great Migration,<sup>9</sup> among other factors, developed this context. It is this author's position that twentieth-century racism<sup>10</sup> that had its roots in the Great Migration, the process of postwar deindustrialization and the scarcity of social resources that was an effect of that deindustrialization intersected to create an environment where the 1967 riots were inevitable.

This research explores the intersection

between deindustrialization and racism and examines how these factors worked together to create a pervasive structure of inequality in inner-city Detroit that led to the 1967 riots which, in turn, effected the city's current circumstance of extensive urban decay and perpetual urban crisis. More specifically, this research examines racism as a response to scarcity of resources induced by an influx of unskilled and semiskilled laborers, both black and white, during the first half of the century and a sudden and severe period of deindustrialization, automation and decentralization in the auto-industry following the Second World War.

My objective is three-fold: 1.) identify and qualify the claim that at the nexus of deindustrialization and racism there is an initiator and accelerator of urban crisis; 2.) examine the concept of racism as a result of scarcity of resources (i.e. jobs, housing, education, etc.) amongst unskilled laborers caused by heavy industrialization and later deindustrialization; 3.) explore the impact of the 1967 race riot on race relations and Detroit's success or failure (economic and socially) since those riots.

These objectives were achieved by answering the following three research questions: 1.) What historical factors have most greatly influenced the deterioration of Detroit City since 1967? 2.) How did industrialization (which caused cities to one, grow at a rate greatly exceeding their infrastructure, and two, created a great dependence within city economies on industry) and deindustrialization create a scarcity of social resources and how did that impact race relations amongst Detroit's working class? 3.) Can it be inferred that the increase in racism and tensions<sup>11</sup> between members of the working class due to post-WWII deindustrialization were a strong motivator for the 1967 race riots?

The method through which conclusions have been drawn is via extensive review of literature that either directly

addresses the Detroit case or indirectly examines the underlying social, economic and/or political factors that contributed to the context in which the riot occurred—that is, processes and problems that are related to Detroit's place in the broader American landscape (for example, sweeping changes occurring simultaneously across the nation that impacted Detroit and its residents, just as many other US cities were impacted).

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### **The Aftermath: Modern-Day Detroit**

Rockets, moon shots  
Spend it on the have nots  
Money, we make it  
Fore we see it you take it  
Oh, make you wanna holler  
The way they do my life  
Make me wanna holler  
The way they do my life

This ain't livin', This ain't livin'  
No, no baby, this ain't livin'  
No, no, no

Inflation no chance  
To increase finance  
Bills pile up sky high  
Send that boy off to die  
Make me wanna holler  
The way they do my life  
Make me wanna holler  
The way they do my life

Hang ups, let downs  
Bad breaks, set backs

Natural fact is  
I can't pay my taxes  
Oh, make me wanna holler  
And throw up both my hands  
Yea, it makes me wanna holler  
And throw up both my hands  
Crime is increasing  
Trigger happy policing  
Panic is spreading

<sup>8</sup> Sugrue, 5.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the Great Migration see *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* by James N. Gregory.

<sup>10</sup> This is to suggest that 20th century racism had something distinctly different than antebellum racism. This racism was almost an amalgamation of racism and feelings of competition over resources (i.e., jobs).

<sup>11</sup> These tensions were played out in everyday interactions between blacks and whites and frequently on the shop floor in factories across the city.

<sup>12</sup> From Marvin Gaye, "Make Me Wanna Holler."

God know where we're heading  
Oh, make me wanna holler  
They don't understand<sup>12</sup>

As one drives past the gutted homes and empty streets of Detroit, Michigan, the sounds of Motown, specifically Marvin Gaye's 1971 hit LP "What's Going On," can be evoked as a soundtrack to life in the city. The lyrics to "Make Me Wanna Holler," reprinted above, reflect the sentiments of many African Americans during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Frustrated with police brutality, unequal access to employment, and the distant nature of civil rights successes<sup>13</sup>, many Black urbanites harbored well-reasoned resentment toward their oppressors, even if they could not put a face directly on whom those oppressors might be. This desire to "holler" is reminiscent of Ron Scott's "time bomb" remark and it can be argued that Gaye and Scott's social commentary both addressed problems that have persisted for over 30 years.

With so much poverty, crime and an overall ambiance of abandonment<sup>14</sup>, it is easy to forget that Detroit is a city with a rich history. Today it is scarred with widespread urban decay. Abandoned buildings line the streets, gunshots are a common occurrence, and high rates of underemployment and joblessness plague this once bustling center of the automobile industry.

In America's industrialized cities members of the working class (who are those employed in low-skill manual labor occupations with characteristically low education and income levels and low chances for upward social mobility<sup>15</sup>) were often in constant competition for urban resources such as housing, education, jobs and social services. The fact that members of the working class in these times were ethnic whites and southern whites and southern blacks added to their interactions a certain level

of inner-class conflict based upon race. In the most rudimentary generalization, southern whites disliked ethnic whites because they were not "truly" American, and both ethnic whites and southern whites disliked blacks because they were black, and each group considered others to be taking everybody else's job, school, or apartment.

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### Toward an Accurate Framework

Prior to examining Detroit's situation it is important to build a theoretical framework through which to view the history and current state of Detroit. The study of urban problems took on increased significance during the early 20th century when urban centers grew at rates not before experienced.<sup>16</sup> The Chicago School of sociological thought emerged from this growing interest. It established a particular emphasis on social failure within the disadvantaged group that would often discount that conditions develop out of a specific historical context and all conclusions must consider that context. The negation of historical context often makes flawed or biased findings more prevalent.<sup>17</sup> Compounded with this is the past nature of academia as an "old boys" society where white males studied the problems of women and people covering all areas of the racial spectrum from a distance.<sup>18</sup> These researchers attempted to remain objective, which is nearly impossible in a race-/class-/gender-focused society.

Minorities were often acutely misunderstood and misrepresented as were members of the low and underclass.<sup>19</sup> According to Sugrue the study of the underclass has taken on three very distinct ideologies:

The first, and most influential, focuses on the behavior and values

of the poor, and the role of federal social programs in fostering a culture of joblessness and dependence in the inner cities. A second offers structural explanations for inequality and urban poverty....A third explanation focuses on politics, emphasizing the marginalization of cities in American social policy, particularly in the aftermath of the urban unrest and racial conflict of the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

This research utilizes a blending of the three explanations Sugrue offers. The importance of blending the three aforementioned conceptual frameworks is that any one, taken separately, ignores the very real impact of the others. It is true that conditions do not exist in a vacuum. History, politics, culture, economics and society all interact to create the world we live in. It is out of this understanding that this research has developed. This multidisciplinary perspective informs the approach taken to explore the very complex and very pressing condition of Detroit, Michigan.<sup>21</sup>

### What Goes Up: 1900-1945

One cannot attack the issue of inequity and race in Detroit without taking an in-depth look at the city's economy during the first half of the 20th century. Under the broad term of economy is employment, including the types of jobs, hiring practices, unions. Of equal importance to Detroit, like many other urban northern cities, are the Great Migrations. These waves of migration represent the largest voluntary movement of African Americans in history. The influx of blacks in northern cities over a short period of time forever changed the economy and the social and political structure of the city.<sup>22</sup>

To tackle the grand subject of American economic practices and strategies during the era, heavy industrialization

13 This distance is referring to the day-to-day experiences of blacks in the city and how those experiences of racism and inequity differ greatly from the idealized reality embodied in things such as Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

14 This feeling of abandonment can be attributed to the decrease in the metropolitan population beginning in the 1970s and persisting through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st.

15 For definitions of working class please see the *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2004 edition.

16 Sugrue, 13.

17 Urban populations were not being studied by other urban dwellers; the experiential difference between researchers and subjects is fodder for cultural misinterpretations.

18 Academic distance ensures that the problems are not solved by those with the most in-depth knowledge of the causes.

19 Underclass refers to the lowest level of the social hierarchy generally composed of the disadvantaged. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2006.

20 Sugrue, 4.

21 For more discussion of the underclass see Michael Katz, *The Underclass Debate*.

22 For more discussion on the Great Migration see Joe William Trotter's *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender*.

must be at the forefront of the discussion. At the turn of the century the United States led the world in automobile production, amongst other industries, and for this reason lawmakers placed great emphasis on growing industry within every city that could.<sup>23</sup> The brunt of this growth took place in cities of the North. Philadelphia, New Jersey, Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago all saw great expansion during the first 20 years of the century.

At the turn of the century Detroit was a relatively small city; certainly it had not reached the scale of Chicago or Philadelphia in population or development. The central city was the most highly populated region and people were employed by small industries such as stove-making or within the service sector. The black population of the city was minimal; however, within the next 20 years the economy began to change rapidly as Detroit became the automobile production center of the world. With this growing industry came employment opportunities for unskilled or semiskilled individuals who were fleeing the South for a better or more equitable life in the North. At the same time Eastern European immigrants were entering the country in search of appropriate employment for their skill level and for the opportunity to achieve the “American Dream.”

Between the years of 1900 and up to immediately before the Second World War, Detroit was a booming city. From 1900 to 1950 Detroit was privy to great and unprecedented growth and development due to the advent of the automobile and subsequent industries. As one of the most influential pull factors for southern laborers, black and white and ethnic whites, heavy wartime industrialization swept across the Midwest and East, and as the so-called Arsenal of Democracy, Detroit’s population more than doubled between 1910 and 1920. Additionally, its black population saw an eight-fold increase. By 1950 Detroit was very near to 2 million inhabitants with blacks making

up 16.2% of the population or just over 300,000 people, up from about 41,000 in 1920. Oftentimes, however, when an area experiences rapid population increases, the infrastructure is not equipped to support such a large population and social resources such as housing and education are difficult to secure. Many Detroiters struggled to find housing; in fact, the crisis became known as Detroit’s Time Bomb.<sup>24</sup> Though the crisis afflicted both blacks and whites, it was especially acute for inner-city blacks, who were migrating to the city in unprecedented numbers. Thomas J. Sugrue writes in his 1996 book *Origins of the Urban Crisis* that between 1941 and 1944 recently arrived black migrants needed 10,000 new housing units, but just over 2,000 public and private units were constructed that were open to black occupancy. In fact, in 1947, though blacks comprised 16.2% of the population, only 8.6% of the city’s 545,000 housing units were available to blacks.

In the early 1900s Detroit led the nation in auto production but also had strong industry in non-automotive arenas such as stove-making, brewing, furniture production and several others. In fact over 40% of industry in Detroit was non-automotive.<sup>25</sup> However, over half was automotive and this emphasis on one industry would prove detrimental in the future.

The industrial expansion brought hundreds of thousands of southerners to the North, where work was seemingly easy to secure. The Great Migration that reached its peak between 1916 and 1929 is identified by Sugrue as a source of Detroit’s everlasting racial boundaries.<sup>26</sup> These boundaries permeated not only the distribution of individuals throughout the city but also the shop floor and even everyday interactions by city dwellers. One of the reasons Detroit was not the “promised land” many southern blacks had anticipated was that hiring practices in Detroit were built out of racist tradi-

tions that often prevented black workers from gaining any employment, let alone employment in desirable or even safe jobs. One way that institutions were able to discriminate against blacks was by tailoring their job orders to job placement agencies toward whites. In December 1946, 35.1% of all jobs orders placed with the Michigan State Employment Service contained discriminatory clauses. This rose to 65% by June 1948.

Racism is largely to blame for the exclusion of such a large segment of the population from fair and equal housing opportunities and jobs as well. There are two types of racism, symbolic and institutional. Symbolic is overt racism based on a belief system that views a race as subordinate. Institutional racism is not overtly expressed, nor do its participants necessarily hold racist beliefs themselves, yet it is the systematizing of racist ideologies.<sup>27</sup> The biases are embedded in social structures, and examples of institutional racism are such practices as bank loan redlining, racial profiling, the war on drugs, and school funding. Institutional racism often infiltrates public policy, especially anything connected to money. Both types of racism were rampant in Detroit with landlords literally writing “no blacks” in their housing listings or charging on average \$10 more per month, and requiring weekly payment or immediate eviction from substandard housing. In public housing, discrimination became systematized and resulted in such discrepancies between placement that between January 1947 and July 1952, 37,382 black families and 56,758 white families applied for housing, yet only 1,226 black families opposed to 9,908 actually obtained housing.<sup>28</sup>

Such an increase in population can drastically reshape a city on many levels. The increase in the population of all people places a strain on social resources such as housing, education and social services. Generally, racism increases as the numbers of “others” to an area

23 More discussion on labor in the 20th century can be found in *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor (Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America)* by Nelson Lichtenstein.

24 Sugrue referenced Detroit’s housing market this way in *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

25 Sugrue, 18.

26 *Ibid.*, 23.

27 Derived from the definition offered by the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2006; for further discussion of racism see *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* by Ali Rattansi.

28 Sugrue, 43.

increases. To add yet another level, such an increase in members of a minority group, in this case African Americans, often sends citizens accustomed to a certain level of separation and certainly propagators (or at least sympathizers) with racist ideology, into a panic.<sup>29</sup> Sugrue writes: "Acting on their perception of the threat of the black newcomers to their stability, economic status, and political power, many of Detroit's working- and middle-class whites banded together in exclusive neighborhood organizations, in what became one of the largest grassroots movements in the city's history."<sup>30</sup> These grassroots organizations took on the shape of restrictive neighborhood covenants. Covenants like these were a representation of how racist ideologies could translate into policies, even on the very local level of allowing blacks to purchase homes in white neighborhoods. These covenants utilized their political clout, such as voting efficacy, and when those tactics proved unsuccessful Sugrue writes: "through sustained violence, Detroit whites engaged in battle over turf, a battle that had economic and social as well as political and ideological consequences."<sup>31</sup> The covenants mostly sprang up during WWII as blacks were beginning to secure enough income to enter into middle class communities throughout the city. Prior to this time however, blacks were mostly located in segregated enclaves throughout the city. These areas would stretch no more than a few city blocks and would contain black family upon black family, oftentimes more than one to a dwelling. The quality of housing for Detroit's black residents was appalling; from dilapidated buildings to those lacking running water and electricity, urban blacks faced great inequality in securing adequate housing at a fair price. Black renters often paid disproportionately high rent compared to their white counterparts. This inequity persisted for many years, and in 1960 over 40% of residencies occupied by blacks had an average rent that equaled

35% of its inhabitant's incomes.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of Detroit's housing crisis lies in the conflict over a social resource that was necessary for all urban dwellers, and more significantly is a reflection of greater neurosis within the social structure of the city that have persisted through the end of the 20th century and into the 21st. Conflict over housing and conflict in the workplace along with everyday interpersonal incongruity brought on by the influx of blacks to the previously mostly white Detroit created an environment where the air was almost seething with racial tension. *Life* magazine reported in 1942 that Detroit can "either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S."<sup>33</sup> It was in this context, where blacks and whites were fighting for jobs and neighborhoods, that "one of the worst riots in twentieth-century America" occurred.

On June 20th, 1943, nearly 100,000 Detroiters, black and white, convened on Belle Isle (a large park in Detroit) to enjoy the beautiful summer day. At various intervals however, young blacks and whites engaged in brawls which were certainly a symptom of greater racial animosities. As word traveled across the city that a race-war was afoot, blacks in the Paradise Valley section of the city looted white-owned stores. In response, the next day whites exceeding 10,000 struck back equally as brutally against blacks in the same Paradise Valley area. The police were not of equal help, many sympathizing with white rioters, and 17 blacks were shot and killed by police, while not one white rioter was. In the end 34 people had been killed (25 of them black), 675 suffered serious injuries and before the federal troops arrived, 1,893 people had already been arrested. Federal troops<sup>34</sup> were sent to the city and the riot was subdued, but the tensions had not been expelled through this explosion, many persisted below the surface. Despite this violent display, blacks continued to migrate to the city well into the 1950s.

### **Must Come Down: 1945-1967**

Though the Great Migration brought droves of newcomers to Detroit, the ascension of Detroit as the "Arsenal of Democracy" during WWI and WWII solidified Detroit's status as an industrial center of the world. In fact, Sugrue found that between 1940 and 1947 overall employment in manufacturing increased by 40%. At this time, unemployment decreased in the city as well and "between 1940 and 1943, the number of unemployed workers in Detroit fell from 135,000 to a mere 4,000."<sup>35</sup> It is during this time that industry was obliged to begin hiring black workers in significant numbers in an attempt to satiate the ever-growing demand within factories producing machines for the war abroad. There were a few integral groups that greatly impacted the decision to hire blacks into industry, all with very different motivations: first, equal rights organizations; second, unions; and third, the Federal government. Additionally, shop managers realized that there was a surplus in black workers (many migrants from the South) who were desperate for employment; industry held no qualms about exploiting this desperation and in turn hired blacks for the menial and dangerous tasks throughout factories. Even though conditions within the city were not as many newcomers expected, word still traveled around the country and people still migrated to the city in very high rates.

Equal rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress, along with black churches, organized for equal rights in many aspects of society, but fought particularly hard for equality in hiring practices, because much of economic inequity begins in employment inequity. Industrial unions, specifically the United Auto Workers, formed alliances with many of these groups during

29 John Higham delves into this concept of "nativism" in his work *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*.

30 Sugrue, 211.

31 *Ibid.*, 257.

32 *Ibid.*, 54.

33 *Ibid.*, 29.

34 Of importance to mention is the demographic of these federal troops; many from small towns around the state of Michigan who had probably never interacted with an African American and who quite possibly held racist notions themselves added more intensity to the already racially charged incident.

35 Sugrue, 19.

the 1940s, which helped to break the pattern of factories using black workers as strikebreakers. The UAW played an integral role in getting and keeping black workers in the factories. Though the UAW was not a utopia of racial togetherness, certainly:

... the UAW brought together industrial workers from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds—Lithuanians, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, Scottish, Irish, Mexicans, Canadians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Italians, Germans, and many more. It overcame initial resistance from African Americans whose church and community leaders were suspicious of trade union activity and southern white migrants who often worshipped in staunchly antiunion storefront churches and belonged to organizations like the Black Legion and the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>36</sup>

Inclusion of African Americans in the UAW benefited all workers because it helped combat the tradition of factories exploiting racial divisions during times of tense negotiations. With black workers on board the UAW was able to present a united front to industrial leadership, and this certainly assisted the UAW in attaining its many objectives.

Not to be ignored is the impact that federal policy had in shaping Detroit's workforce largely through President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802. It mandated nondiscrimination in war industries (which made up the brunt of Detroit's industry at the time), and it also created the Fair Employment Practices Commission, which worked in cooperation with Detroit's NAACP and the UAW to conduct investigations at plants in Detroit and to put pressure on managers to hire black workers.<sup>37</sup>

Growth throughout the war continued unchecked; while Detroit invested great time and effort in growing and sustaining its industries, there was no overt move-

ment to diversify the city's economy. Industry was content to believe that this economic boom, grown from the war, would last for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, the foreseeable future was shorter than most expected. Detroit's factories began their exodus from the city almost immediately following the end of WWII. The motivations for leaving were varied but included high city property taxes, lack of space, and the growing industrial centers in the western part of the country. The process of industry moving from its location in the city is called decentralization and it would prove particularly detrimental to Detroit City and acutely detrimental to Detroit's black residents. Though a significant portion of black workers had secured a place among the middle class during the economic boom of the World War years, most had not reached a level in which they had the same kind of mobility that whites enjoyed. Around the same time as industry decentralized, war veterans were returning from Europe and thus began the simultaneous exodus of whites from Detroit. This process of "white flight" motivated by suburbanization drove the tax base within the city to an unprecedented low. A low tax base translates into funding cuts in social services like education, welfare, public housing, and public services in general. These funding cuts would prove to perpetuate urban crises in later years.

For the industries that did stay within the city limits, the process of automation continued to shape the workforce in a way that revealed ever-present inequalities that had not previously been so intense. Specifically, the concepts of seniority and vulnerability within industry impacted blacks at much greater rates than whites. Seniority was particularly detrimental to blacks because they had just received (relatively) unrestricted access to factory jobs during the war, so by default, they were often "last hired, first fired," especially during this period of widespread automation. Coupled with the problem of seniority is the vulner-

ability of un- to semiskilled workers to a changing economy and industry. As technology evolved, blacks, who were traditionally less educated and generally unable to change that, bore the brunt of skills-based layoffs.

An ailing tax base, high unemployment rates, daily instances of police brutality, and a steadily decaying metropolitan center all set the timer for the bomb Ron Scott mentions resided within most black Detroiters.

### **And When it Hits the Ground: The 1967 Riot**

There was a pot about to overflow, and there was rage that was about to come out. And the rebellion just provided an opportunity for that. I mean, why else would people get upset, cops raiding a blind pig. They'd done that numerous times before. But people just got tired, people just got tired of it. And it just exploded.<sup>38</sup>

In the ten years that followed the end of WWII, Detroit industry continued to decentralize and automate at an impressive rate until, in the mid-1960s, Detroit had become a shell of its former self. The city had become predominantly black as whites fled to the suburbs, and many of the old houses built in the late 1800s to early 1900s<sup>39</sup>, which made up the majority of Detroit's housing, had fallen into various states of disrepair, their often-unemployed residents unable to expend the economic resources necessary for upkeep, let alone improvements. Unemployment was high for blacks with rates double that of whites in 1960. Therefore, the link between race, class, and access to resources is seen most markedly within this era, and a vicious cycle of poverty and inequity perpetuated throughout the 1960s; the industrial bubble had burst and blacks were left to pick up the pieces.

Unrest grew to an unprecedented high among inner-city blacks for several rea-

36 Ibid., 19.

37 Ibid., 27.

38 Voices of Freedom, 376.

39 Hersey, xi.

40 Black youths were especially susceptible to the shortage of jobs with 35% of 19-year-old black males unemployed in 1960 as opposed to 8.9% of their white counterparts; Hersey xi.

sons during the 1960s. Inability to secure employment<sup>40</sup>, the economic repercussions of job loss, inadequate housing, and racist interactions with police had been problems in Detroit for many years. In the 1960s, however, these problems took on a new intensity as black war veterans had returned, having fought side by side with whites. With them came the concept that they had fought for racial equality outside of the United States, and that those same ideals should be translated to life back in the States. Black political consciousness grew as a movement during the civil rights era, and unrest and militancy were added to the mix as frustrations coupled with an increased level of social capital generated from successes during the fight for civil rights energized many blacks towards a more proactive orientation during the 1960s. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Detroit; all across the country urban centers were experiencing the same kind of outward expression of frustrations over racial injustices (including economic structures and overt racism).

Bobby Seale, one of the founding members of the Black Panther Party, spoke of the ideological development of black power:

We sat down and began to write out this ten-point platform program: we want power to determine our own destiny in our own black community. We want organized political electoral power. Full employment. Decent housing. Decent education to tell us about our true selves. Not to have to fight in Vietnam. An immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people. The right to have juries of our peers in the courts... We wanted land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.<sup>41</sup>

For many black Detroiters, the issue of black power often revolved around interactions with police. These interactions were often a point of contention for many blacks across the U.S. This

can certainly be attributed to, in part, the demographic composition of the police force where, though over one-third of Detroit's population was black<sup>42</sup>, less than five percent of the police force was. Detroit's police had affected a tradition of arresting young black males and later charging them with a crime. This occurred at high rates around the city.<sup>43</sup>

The unrest reached its peak the morning of July 23rd around three o'clock in the morning. As a group of about eighty black Detroiters gathered to celebrate the homecoming of two Vietnam soldiers at an after-hours nightclub, the police burst in, as was par for course in regards to establishments like this. However as partygoers were directed outside, the crowd did not disburse; in fact, it grew as individuals came from the surrounding homes to join the already mob-like congregation.

The streets were clogged. We couldn't get people to disburse. There was this mumbling going on...The people that were milling around angry and belligerent were my constituents, were people I knew, friends of mine, were acquaintances, and it was a mean-spirited kind of mood that hung over this.<sup>44</sup>

Uninterested in listening to their councilman's pleas, the mob continued to grow. The noise of windows being broken could be heard and soon the first fire had been set. What ensued was what some would call a riot, others a rebellion, but it must be agreed upon that the most violent civil uprising in US history occurred over the next several days. The National Guard<sup>45</sup> was sent in to subdue the rioters and tanks could be seen driving down various Detroit streets. At the end of the next five days, 43 people were dead, 467 injured, over 7,200 had been arrested, and more than 2,000 buildings had been engulfed in fire.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Crisis: Post 1967**

Joblessness in Detroit has been a major problem since the postwar years

but has continued to worsen as each year passes. As metropolitan Detroit has grown and expanded into myriad suburban areas and satellite communities such as Dearborn Heights and Southfield have grown into cities themselves, Detroit proper has continued its downward spiral, leaving its citizens grappling for the few low-paying service jobs that are available within the city limits. With a deplorable public transit system (due mostly to city planners designing Detroit to function as a hub for automobile owners), it was often difficult for those without their own cars to secure substantial employment for long periods of time. This in turn left city residents in the throes of poverty with seemingly no way out.

Education is often considered a way to escape such desperate conditions; however, as Detroit was in the middle of a budget crisis, schools were closing across the city to cut costs. The schools in the city were overcrowded. With the recent closings, already overburdened schools were weighed down with even more students. The situation in Detroit was most certainly "separate and unequal" with high school dropout rates significantly higher than the national average.

Housing in Detroit has not improved since the housing crisis of the early twentieth century. There is no longer a shortage of homes; however, there is a shortage of suitable housing as the city tears down block after block of dilapidated houses, leaving empty lots in its wake. Often- times these homes are torn down to remove undesirable and dangerous crack houses that sprung up around the city (as they did in many major cities) during the 1980s. Property value has plummeted, and suburbanites are more than hesitant to return to the city.

### **Connecting the Dots: The Critical Nexus**

Racism has been a persistent part of American society since its inception. It has shaped everything from the demography of major American cities to the almost second-nature response of white women to hold their purses tight when

41 Voices of Freedom, 353.

42 Hersey, xi.

43 For more discussion see *The Algiers Motel Incident*.

44 African American Councilman John Conyers describes his arrival at the site of the raid in *Voices of Freedom*, 378.



around black youths. Racist ideologies are present within the media and within the minds of arguably every individual within this country. The American brand of racism even attaches itself quickly to the minds of foreigners who have never seen anything like it in their native lands. Racism is not solely a rural phenomenon; urban centers experience their own blend of institutional and symbolic racism, apparent in high rates of unemployment, crime, and high school dropouts within these cities. Nearly every social issue in modern American society is the result of some blend of racism and classism that promises one group will always surpass another in terms of economic success, political power, and equality. When racism is considered in the context of industrialized and later deindustrialized America, as described above, an interesting tension develops between what autonomous individuals believe to be their basic human rights and what their reality is. This tension can create enough unrest to motivate an outcry like the one described above, in this case the 1967 Riot.

Outcries like this, however, do not resolve the deeper issues of racism and the remnants of deindustrialization. They do, however, bring to the forefront for some those issues, and for others they simply reaffirm the ideology that African Americans are hell-bent on destroying American society. The 1967 Riot left its footprint on Detroit, both economically and socially. This footprint follows years of tracks left by both racism and deindustrialization. This research has determined that these three incidences, two continuous and one abrupt, have most certainly been the most significant factors in Detroit's urban crisis since 1967. It can also be found in speaking with individuals who lived through the riot; many will tell you that "things just weren't the same after 1967."

This research is certainly not exhaustive. It was the express intention of this research to develop an effective framework for exploring this issue further

that considered the many aspects that shape societies, placing special emphasis on historical precedents and how those worked to create the present situation. Developing this framework is the first step in beginning to draw accurate conclusions. Those conclusions, if rooted in truth, can be applied to solutions that may finally be able to wear down patterns etched in stone for the last century. The importance of changing those patterns is the necessity to reshape current ideologies and institutions that perpetuate inequities in American cities across the country. Specifically to this case, what's at stake in the success or failure of Detroit is its nearly 900,000 citizens whose city cannot provide adequate opportunities to reaffirm this great city as a forerunner of the American landscape. ■

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45 National Guardsmen were recruited from around the state of Michigan, from cities that often contained few or no African Americans. The significance of this is that once again you have a predominantly white arm of the State sent to control a group that has been neglected by that very same State. The collective anger that many blacks felt towards authority was by no small mistake related to the exclusionary nature of law enforcement.

46 For a more in-depth account of the riot see *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* by Sidney Fine, 2007.

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